

Naia's family and the Second World War in Denmark

Naia's great-grandfather was a man called Karlo Steffensen. He was from a fishing village south of Copenhagen called Karrebæksminde. Copenhagen is the capital of Denmark, where the book *Number the Stars* is set. He was born in 1905. His father was Jewish and his mother was Lutheran. He was not brought up with his father but was adopted by his mother's new husband. Karlo's father visited and sent presents and money, and he had other children who were brought up in the Jewish religion, but Naia's great-grandfather wasn't. He lived with his mother, stepfather and half-siblings in Karrebæksminde, very near the town of Næstved where his father lived. There were not many Jewish people in Denmark and the towns with the most Jews were Næstved, Slagelse and Copenhagen. Most people didn't know that Karlo's father was Jewish, although they knew that he was not the son of his mother's husband because he had a different surname. He was called Steffensen, just like Naia, but everybody else in that family was called Karlsen. Steffensen isn't a typically Jewish name, and it wasn't his father's surname either. Karlo's father and his other children were called Fischer, and relatives of Naia with that surname still live in Denmark.

Karlo's stepfather was a fisherman, and Karlo and his brother Erland grew up learning to catch fish and sail boats. Their sailing skills and their knowledge of the waters between Denmark and Sweden were going to be very useful for them and for the Fischers later on in life.

On the 9th April 1940, Denmark was invaded by Germany. By the time this happened,

Karlo was married to his wife Agnete Hansen and had moved from his home village to a town called Præstø. His stepfather and brother Erland were running their fishing business in their village and had also branched out into marine construction; if you go to Karrebæksminde today, you will see a pier they built that is still standing. Karlo was a fisherman and a local politician elected to the town council for the Conservative Party. When the war broke out, Karlo and Agnete were 35 and 28 years old and they had three children: Tove, Inge and Arne. They later had two more daughters called Åse and Anne. Arne was Naia's grandfather, and he was born in April 1939, a year before the war came to Denmark.

Denmark is a small and flat country with a small army and navy, so the fighting didn't last long and not many people were killed or injured. The Germans crossed the land border in the south and went ashore in Copenhagen and other cities. The Danish government surrendered after a day and a half.

Naia's great-grandmother Agnete was from a town called Holbæk. She was born in 1912. When she was a teenager her mother died, her father's farms and shops did not do very well, and the family moved to Copenhagen. One of her brothers was a policeman called Jørgen. On the day of the invasion, he was wounded outside the royal palace in Copenhagen. I think he was shot in the throat, but he got away and hid from the Germans. He managed to get out of Copenhagen and went to Naia's great-grandparents' house in Præstø. I don't know how he got there, but he might have had help from his friends, maybe other police officers or people in the Communist Party, which he was a member of. You might know from having read about the war that Hitler and the National Socialist

government in Germany didn't like Jews and communists and blamed them for all the bad things that had happened in Germany and Europe. As a communist who had been shooting at the Germans, he would have been in big trouble if he had been caught.

Naia's great-grandparents hid Jørgen and looked after him until he recovered. But it was dangerous for him to stay in Denmark. They decided that Karlo and his brother Erland should smuggle him out to Sweden. Sweden was just across the water and not occupied by Germany. It was a short trip by boat but very dangerous. I don't know on which date they went, but it must have been some time in the spring of 1940. I have been told that they chose a night when it was darker than usual and they could expect fewer German patrol boats on the water than other nights. I believe they went in a small rowing boat because they were just three people and because a small boat would make no engine noise and be less conspicuous. They left from a beach near a village called Rødvig, which is a little to the north of Præstø. They had a sister who lived in the village and who was married to a mechanic there. They made the crossing safely, Karlo and Erland made it back home, and Jørgen spent the next few years as a refugee in Sweden. In 1943 the Swedish government allowed the Danish refugees to set up a small army called the Danish Brigade. Jørgen joined the Danish Brigade and trained as a motorised infantry driver. He came back to Denmark on the 5th May 1945 and worked as an ambulance driver until he retired. He stayed a member of the Communist Party until the Hungarian Uprising in 1956. Then he and his brother Knud left the party and helped to found a new political party called the Socialist People's Party.

Karlo did not like that Denmark was occupied and that the Danish government was doing

what the Germans told them to do. Some Danish politicians had left the country and set up a government in exile in London in the UK. Karlo thought the people who had gone to London were right because they disagreed with the politicians in Denmark who collaborated with the Germans. The government in exile worked with the British and other Allies against the Germans. To fight against the German occupation, Karlo joined the underground resistance movement, which was like a secret army. He never wanted to talk much about what he did in the resistance. He had a radio transmitter hidden under the floorboards in Naia's grandfather and great-aunt Inge's room. He would sometimes get it out and climb into the attic to talk to Danish people in the UK who worked for the British army's Special Operations Executive. This was a part of the British army that helped the resistance movements in German-occupied countries like Denmark. The SOE would give him coded messages so that he would know where and when to go at night when British planes would drop weapons for the resistance in fields and forests around South Zealand. He also distributed illegal newspapers. One of the few things that Naia's grandfather remembers from the occupation was that the German army came to search the house and that they were all very scared. The soldiers didn't find anything. Another time, when Karlo sent a telegram to a marine biologist at the University of Copenhagen, the Germans thought it had a secret message and came to question him. This telegram was innocent. He was just telling his friend that he had caught a rare fish that the scientist was interested in, and the Germans thought it was about a resistance fighter who had been caught.

The occupation was a difficult time for most people and especially for Danish Jews. Denmark was not under direct military rule and the government could protect its Jewish

citizens until 1943 when the German military demanded a list of all Jews, so that they could send them to concentration camps. Karlo was not registered as a Jew, but his father, the father's wife and his half-siblings were. If people had known that his father was Jewish, Karlo would also have been on the list of people to be arrested.

As you will know from *Number the Stars*, almost all Danish Jews were rescued by fishermen who sailed them to Sweden. Naia's great-grandfather was one of those fishermen, and although he didn't practice the religion or stand out from Christian Danish people, he was also considered Jewish by the Nazis. So in 1943, Karlo and his brother Erland made the dangerous trip to Sweden and back again, this time to save Karlo's family from deportation. And just like the first time, when he had sailed his wife's brother to Sweden, he wasn't caught and made it back home. I think they went in a bigger fishing boat on the second trip.

After the war, the Fischers returned to Denmark. One of the sons was called Poul. He was Naia's great-grandfather's half-brother. He married a Christian and their children Viggo, Astrid and Carsten were not brought up in the Jewish religion. He founded a company that traded in fish and fishing equipment and bought a house in the same street as Naia's great-granduncle Erland. Poul's son Viggo became a lawyer and politician, and Viggo's brother Carsten and sister Astrid are a biologist and journalist. When he was studying in the United States in the 1960s, Viggo met a lady from Japan called Midori. They are both alive and live in Copenhagen.

The Steffensen family kept living in the same area for about ten years after the war.

Around 1955 they moved from South Zealand to another part of the country near the German border. It is part of Denmark today and was so when they moved there, but the Danish-German border has changed a few times in history. The last time it changed was in 1920. The region is both called South Jutland and North Schleswig. It is the northern part of an old duchy called Schleswig. The northern part of Schleswig is in Denmark and the southern part is in Germany. Some of the people living in the German part are Danish, and some of the people living in the Danish part are German. When our family moved there, many of the local Danish people were very angry with the Germans and did not treat them well. Almost all German men in southern Denmark were put in a concentration camp called Frøslev when the war ended, even if they hadn't done anything wrong. Just being German was considered bad. Some were there for six months, some for a year, and most of them were released again. Not all of them were Nazis, and although they spoke German they were Danish citizens like everybody else.

Naia's great-grandfather thought it was wrong that the German army had occupied Denmark and tried to kill people like him and his family, but he also didn't like the way most other Danish people were treating their German neighbours after the war. He and his wife Agnete didn't hate all Germans and many of their new friends in South Jutland were what we call ethnic Germans. That means people who lived in Denmark and had Danish passports but who spoke German at home, went to German churches, and read German books and newspapers. One of these people was Naia's great-uncle Ingwert. He was the husband of Naia's grandfather's sister Inge. His father had been the chairman of an organisation called the Federation of German North Schleswigians and he wanted the southern part of Denmark to become German again, as it had been until 1920. Ingwert

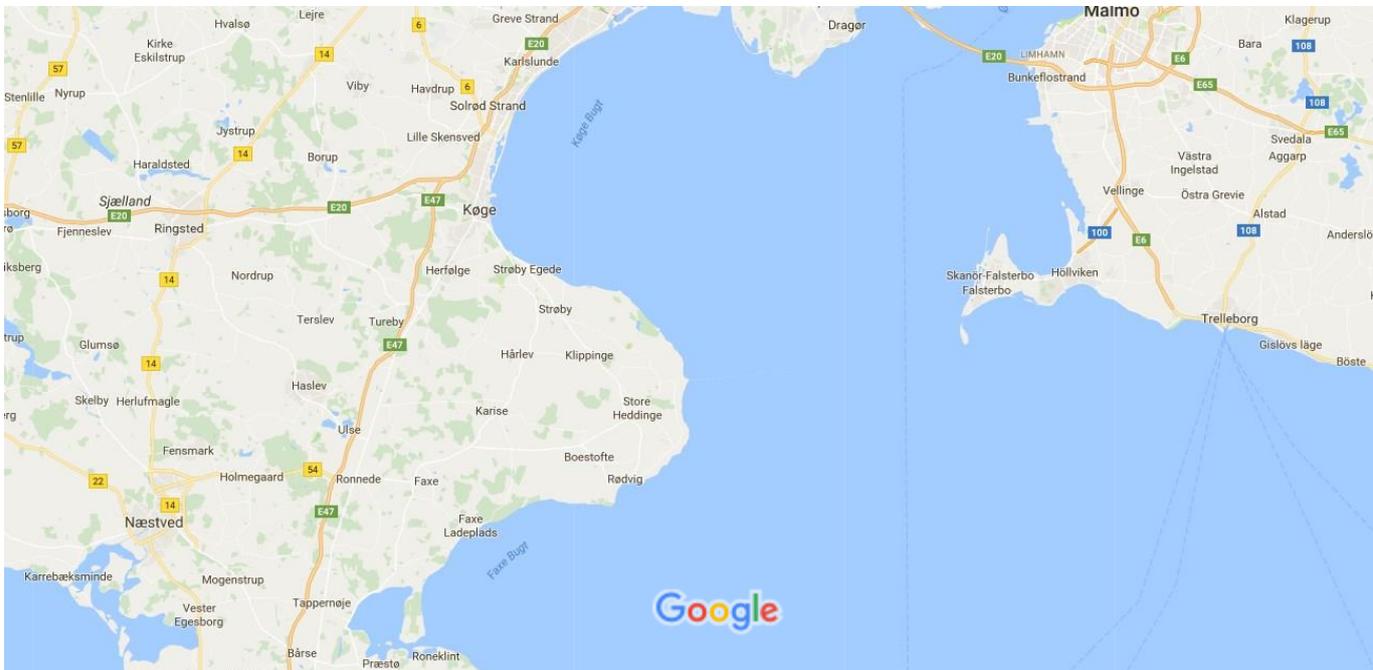
was just a small boy when the war ended and his father was sent to the concentration camp. All the German schools had been closed and stayed closed until 1957, so he had to go to a Danish school where the teachers would beat him, call him “dirty German boy”, and make him do things like dig their gardens instead of studying with the other children. Although he had grown up speaking German, for much of his life Ingwert hated Germans and the German language, and it was only a few years before he died in 2008 that he began to speak German again. So while it is true that the National Socialist government in Germany did terrible things to Denmark and to Jewish people all over Europe, Naia’s great-grandparents knew that not all Germans were bad and that they were treated very unfairly by some Danish people. Both they and Naia’s grandfather Arne had very good friends who were German, and her great-aunt Inge married one.

Map 1: Denmark and neighbouring countries in northern Europe



Map data ©2016 GeoBasis-DE/BKG (©2009). Google 100 km

Map 2: South Zealand (Denmark) and Scania (Sweden)



Map data ©2016 Google 10 km

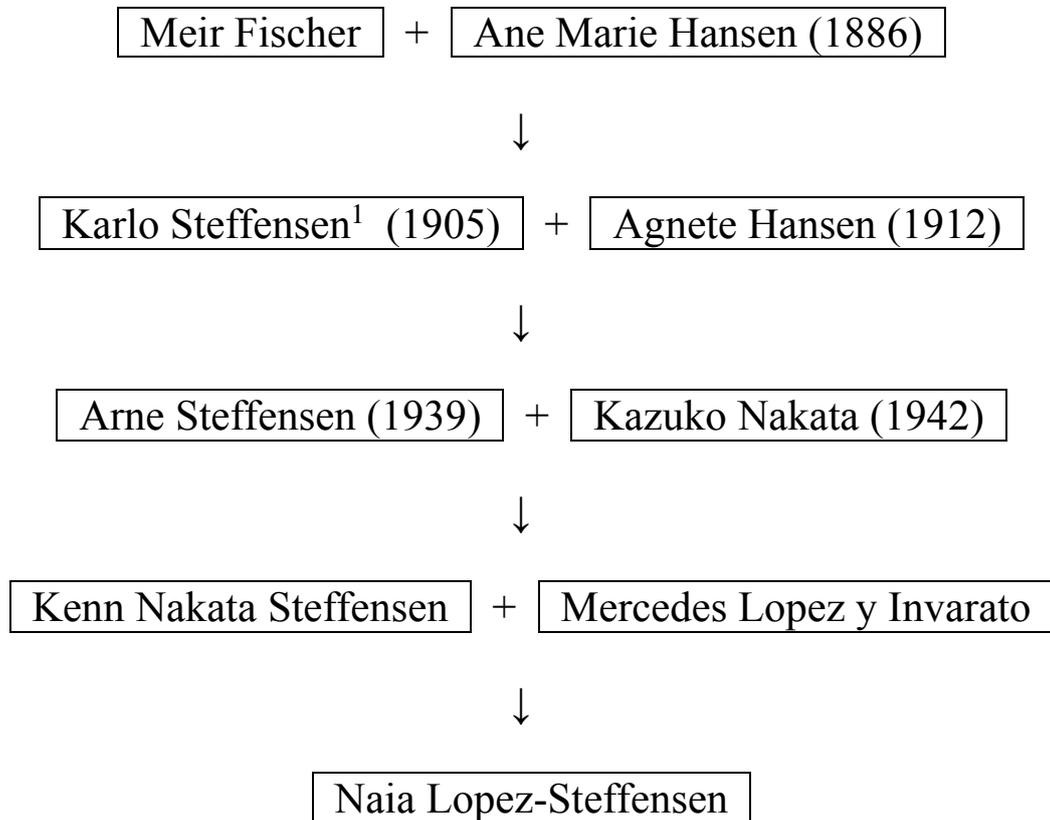
People mentioned

Karlo Steffensen	Naia's great-grandfather, a half-Jewish fisherman, local politician, and resistance fighter. He sailed his brother-in-law and his Jewish family to Sweden.
Agnete Steffensen (Hansen)	Karlo's wife, Naia's great-grandmother.
Jørgen Hansen	Agnete's brother, a policeman in Copenhagen. He was wounded during the invasion and escaped to Sweden in 1940, with the help of Karlo, Agnete and Erland.
Erland Karlsen	Karlo's half-brother, who sailed to Sweden with him twice, in 1940 and 1943.
The Fischers	Karlo's Jewish family. Karlo and Erland smuggled them to Sweden.
Inge Jepsen (Steffensen)	Naia's great-aunt, older sister of her grandfather Arne.
Ingwert Jepsen	Inge's husband, from a German-speaking family in Denmark. His father was sent to a Danish concentration camp after the war.
Arne Steffensen	Naia's grandfather. He was a baby when the war broke out and six years old when it ended.

Places mentioned

Denmark	A small country in Scandinavia, north of Germany, south of Norway, and east of Sweden.
Copenhagen	The capital of Denmark.
Næstved	The town where the Fischer family lived.
Præstø	The town where Karlo and Agnete were living when the war broke out.
Karrebæksminde	The village where Karlo and Erland grew up and Erland lived all his life.
Rødvig	The village from where Karlo and Erland sailed to Sweden. Their sister Klara lived there.
Zealand	The Danish island where all the places above are.
North Schleswig	Where Naia's family moved after the war. Many people there spoke German and were disliked by Danish people after the war. Naia's great-aunt Inge married Ingwert, whose family spoke German.

Four generations of Naia's family



¹ Karlo got the name Steffensen because his father was married to someone else, and his mother was not married. They told people that a man called Steffen was the father and that he had run away to America. In reality, Steffen wanted to go to live in America but couldn't afford it. Karlo's real father, who was rich, paid for his ticket and gave him money to pretend the child was his. That is why Karlo got the name Steffensen, which means "Steven's son", like the English names Stevenson and Stevens.